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ABSTRACT

Humor can be incorporated advantageously in personality guidance within the group and individual context. The guidance teacher must, in the first instance know when humor should be applied within the group context; secondly, the teacher is responsible for ensuring that humor is not abused, either by the group or himself. Should these conditions be met, then humor should have a beneficial effect on the group. Humor has been found to be a feature of spontaneity. Some may argue that one guidance teacher may possess the gift of humor while the next may not. However, most guidance teachers do possess a sense of humor to a greater or lesser degree. Humor in group guidance should be spontaneous. It should primarily reflect the attitude of the guidance teacher; the guidance teacher accepts it as an obvious form of expression within the group which should be promoted and encouraged. Further research on the role which humor should serve in educational/academic and vocational guidance is desireable. (ABL)

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THE USE AND ABUSE OF HUMOUR IN PERSONALITY GUIDANCE.

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THE USE AND ABUSE OF HUMOUR IN PERSONALITY GUIDANCE

1. Introduction and Orientation

A review of published literature brings to light that thus far minimal use has been made of humour in therapy, group guidance and counselling. This fact is quite strange when one considers the fact that humour is such an important facet of therapy and group counselling (Bloomfield, 1980:135; **et al.**, 1983:89).

2. What is Humour?

Vaillant (quoted from Bloch **et al.**, 1983:31) defines humour as a mature defence mechanism, for openly expressing ideas and feelings without experiencing personal inconvenience of having an unpleasant effect on others. Humour is a direct expression of a sub-conscious human process. It unites opposites, accentuates anomalies and pinpoints the senselessness of irreconcilable desires. It is the paradox and absurdity which leads to laughter. Humour masks aggression and gives it a socially acceptable form. Countless so-called mother-in-law jokes point to direct feelings of enmity towards the mother-in-law. A person may laugh when he has a sudden or inspirational insight into the self-conscious. Laughter or a smile gives recognition to something. The loudness or shrillness of a person's laughter betrays his feelings on the matter (Bloomfield, 1980:135-136; O'Connell, 1976:322).

Rosenheim's approach (as quoted by Nero, 1986:189) is that humour is an inter-personal experience which is used for enhancing a client's self-image: it therefore suggests an improvement on the person's ability to view others as well as himself objectively, as well as the development of a willingness to freely express his emotions.

Humour can furthermore be regarded as a method by which warm spontaneous relationships with clients are created, anxieties are reduced and also the feeling of distance between therapist and client can be reduced. In the following paragraph the focus is placed on the value (use) of humour.

3. The value of Humour

Most researchers agree that humour has a beneficial effect on humans. Normal self-actualised persons possess a sense of humour (Maslow, 1954). According to Prerost (1983:222) and Mindess (1976) humour is essential where group and individual therapy is done. A good sense of humour is being regarded as a sign of good mental health. Humour is a social balm which promotes communication between persons (Martineau, 1972:176-188; Bell **et al**, 1986:51). Megdell (1984:517) found that students preferred lecturers who had a sense of humour because such lecturers created a more positive atmosphere in the classroom.

According to Shertzer and Stone (1980) there is a connection between humour and counselling skills. The counsellor or therapist not only enjoys the reward of social interaction; he experiences personal growth and his self-image develops positively (Prerost, 1983:223; Bell **et al.**, 1986:54). Kramer (1986:123) is of the opinion that humour also acts as an adaptation mechanism which enables the counsellor to relax. Using humour enables the counsellor to consider strategies with which he may better assist his client. Reducing humour during therapy or counselling would indicate a withdrawal of social interaction and a blockage of the feedback from the group. Self-confidence should gradually dominate all experiences.

4. The use of Humour in Personality Guidance

Does humour have a place in forming personality guidance within the group and the individual context, and if indeed so, to what extent? Answers to these questions are not to be found in any literature; in fact, humour in School Guidance relating to the component personality, educational and vocational guidance in the group and individual context has received very little (if indeed any) attention. Neglecting humour in School Guidance does come as a surprise when one considers the fact that all forms of emotional experiences in one stage or another (also the expression of humour during group and individual guidance) are experienced.

Published contributions on humour in group work are of an anacdotal kind and little light is cast on the contribution of humour to group activities. Because personality guidance has as its aim, amongst others, the maintenance and promotion of the mental health of the child, little doubt can be cast on the place and the value of humour in personality guidance and may very well be an important means of guidance. It must also be borne in mind that non-applicable humour could be detrimental to group work and may even be destructive.

Guidance teachers may therefore feel a need for practical guidelines on how humour may and should be applied in personality guidance. The purpose of this article being to remedy the deficiency.

In order to differentiate between the use and misuse of humour the interactive model of Yalom (1975) was adapted for this purpose and is used as a guide (Table 1).

Table 1

Uses of humour in group and individual guidance

A. School Guidance teacher-related humour

* Model (imitate) postures taken by guidance teacher
* Self revelation - the guidance teacher reveals his humanness
* Interpretation - humour transmits the message (lesson) clearly

B Student-related humour

* The touch for seeing matters in perspective

* To counter exaggerated seriousness

* Promotes social skills

* Self revelation

C Group-related humour

* Group cohesion is promoted by participating in humorous situations

* Insight into group-dynamics - subjects become clearer when humour is used

* Tension is reduced - humour defuses stress

A. School Guidance teacher related humour

The guidance teachers use of humour enables students to see him in "a different light", which in turn helps to interpret difficult situations to the group.

* Model

The School Guidance teacher exercises an immense influence on the group, much of which is concealed and in silence. His demonstration of the various behavioral roles opens the way for students to emulate certain of such roles. Humour helps the group unbend. According to Bloch **et al** (1983:90) the sincerity of the School Guidance teacher and his ability to get on with the group are essential qualities for the founding of an effective School Guidance teacher-student relationship.

In one stage of a group discussion all the members tried to state their viewpoints simultaneously. The guidance teacher realising he was losing control over the group, brought their attention to a transparency image (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1

The group immediately realised that because of their behaviour the School Guidance teacher had landed in a fix. The group enjoyed a good laugh for a few seconds after which the group activities continued in an orderly and controlled way.

* Self revelation

Self revalation indicates to what extent the School Guidance teacher is willing to reveal aspects of his own personality to the group. Well considered revelations of his humanness, warmth, empathy, vulnerability and doubts promotes group intimacy and contributes towards the smooth running of group sessions. The School Guidance teacher's willingness to laugh at his own expense without feeling sheepish or self-conscious can be of great value to the group (Bloomfield, 1980:139). A person who is able to laugh at himself is, according to Allport (1956), capable of coping with his problem.

John being refined (feministic) was very shy and timid. In the group he admitted that a stigma already clung to him. Several group members supported him by referring to incidents when their behaviour was also typified as being feministic. The School Guidance teacher joined the discourse by admitting that certain staff members regarded him as the "shrink" or "Head shrink" and that countless jokes were made at his expense. This admission had the group in fits of laughter.

* Interpretation

Humour provides a strange and unexpected viewpoint on a certain aspect which is accompanied by tension (stress) and which is then manifested by humour or laughter (Kostler, 1966:35). The juxtaposition of images and surprises in group counselling can counteract group resistance and doubt and stimulate group curiosity. Telling a joke will not always have the desired effect, yet the example of Alex can illustrate how including humour may have a clearcut message for the group. Alex found it difficult to plan his day meaningfully and in the group he had many reasons (excuses) as to why he hadn't been chosen for a certain tennis team. The Guidance teacher in turn told the joke about the man, who day after day at work complained about his monotonous and tasteless sandwiches. When his colleagues sympathetically suggested that he ask his wife to put something other than cheese on his sandwiches, the man nonchalantly remarked that he made his own sandwiches. This the group found humorous and laughed, not at Alex, but with him. The group had immediately recognised the connection between Alex's problem and the joke and could therefore make positive contributions. This gave Alex the opportunity to view his problem form a different angle. This "new view" of a problem led the group to introspection.

B. Student-related humour

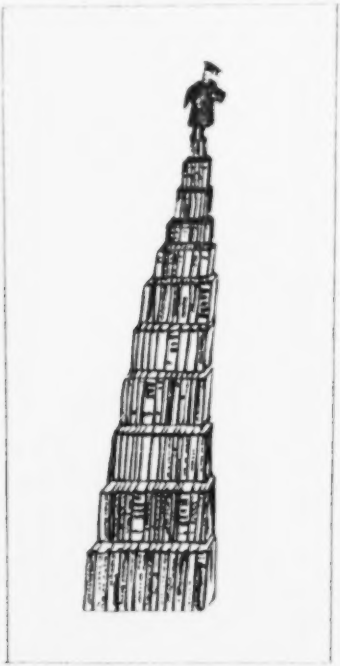
Developing a sense of humour, and more specifically to laugh at one's self contributes undeniably toward developing a positive self-image.

* The touch to see matters in perspective

It is important that humour be applied to personality counselling because emotional personality problems are addressed. The example of Mary shall be used to illustrate this aspect. During a group discussion she set un-

realistic and unattainably high ideals for herself. Remarks and positive comment by die group could make her change her mind. At that critical moment the Guidance teacher showed the group a transparency (Figure 2).

Figure 2



The figure on the screen evoked spontaneous smiles from both the group as well as Mary. She could identify herself with the figure and could consequently place her own position in perspective.

* Exaggerated seriousness

Cynism and depression is common amongst students (adolescents) who experience self-image problems. A few such students could seriously handicap group-cohesion. By applying humour the defence of the student can be penetrated which could lead to behavioural change (Hunsaker, 1988:285).

When discussing the theme "self-image", one or more of the students may participate in the discussion with tremendous seriousness and correctness. They fear personal critisism making the situation unbearable for the rest of the group. The tension may be relieved should the Guidance officer choose to show the transparency "I" to the group (Figure 3).

FIGURE 3

This would pave the way for that serious and uncertain of himself student, to view himself with greater openness and higher regard.

* Promote social skills

All aspects of humour (including inter alia the ability to smile, to laugh, an appreciation for the absurd and an ability to grasp and re-tell jokes) are important skills which may be applied to a variety of social situations.

* Self-revelation

Revealing intensely personal and very often embarrasing information which may be painful and humiliating to the student appears to have especial therapeutic value for the person himself as well as the group because it promotes group-cohesion.

Ellen's participation in the group discussion on how a person reacts to the death of a beloved (with regards to the above personality development) illustrates the use of humour in self-revelation and the release of emotions. A few members of the group spontaneously shared their opinions and attitudes with other members of the group, but Ellen only watched silently. When her opinion was asked she suddenly and humoristically told of a funeral she had watched on TV. The group enjoyed it but it soon became evident that she was revealing her real fear as to how she would react to the death of a loved one.

C. Group-related humour

Humour is important for the survival of the group. It serves as a binding force and aids members to have appreciation for the dynamic processes taking place.

* Tension is decreased

The example of the two bosom friends should illustrate the situation further. The two girls were very attached to each other. It was also customary for the one girl to change clothes for tennis practice at her friend's home. The group was aware of this. Their frienship was enhanced further due to a mutual problem, namely, an obsession for attention. Their obsession to receive attention was raised by the group on numerous occasions but was ignored. During a follow-up group discussion the two girls mentioned feelings about each other about which they had thus far kept silent. The rest of the group were uncomfortably silent. The atmosphere felt charged until the one girl jokingly remarked that the fact the she couldn't change at her friend's home that afternoon was in no way related to their feud. The confession was so sudden and unexpedted that the whole group burst out laughing from sheer relief. There-after the situation was defused and the discussion could continue in good spirit.

5. Misuse of Humour

From the discussion thus far, it seems apparent that all participants to group discussions benefit from humour. Humour however can also be misused.

A School Guidance teacher-related malpractices

The Guidance teacher can for example apply for his own benefit and not for that of the group.

* Defence

Rather than initiating humour to eliminate group tension the Guidance teacher may use humour as a defense against his own fears.

* Aggression

Belitting and sarcastic remarks can be clothed in a smile and may serve as a method for the Guidance teacher to mask his own latent rage. Humour then becomes a means to give expression to subdued aggression, and deprives the student(s) of the opportunity of responding.

* Self revelation and winning ways

The Guidance teacher's need for recognition by the group or to channel students' anger away from himself could lead to the misuse of humour. Because of his narcistic behaviour the Guidance teacher ensures an intensitivity toward the needs of students.

* Confusion

Too much humour and too many jokes conceals the actual purpose of group discussion. The group may never doubt the intentions of the Guidance teacher.

B. Student-directed humour

The student may use humour as a clever means of protection against group-interaction.

* The clown

The student adopts the role of a clown just as the Guidance teacher uses humour to have the group accept him. The group may regard his conduct as obstructive for group-dynamics and may even reject him.

* The scapegoat

The group may decide upon a member to act as a buffer for their hostile and negative feelings. The scapegoeat then becomes the object of incessant "harmless" jokes which masks the actual hostile character of the interaction.

* Evasion by self-ridicule

The student can apply humour to avoid prying into painful and humiliating matters.

C. Group-related humour

The group as a whole can apply humour to avoid work.

* Frivolity

The frivolity of the group can be a sign that they want to avoid serious group work (Mindess, 1976:331-341).

6. Conclusion

Initially the question raised was whether humour had a place in group counselling. The conclusion derived at was that humour can be incorporated advantageously in personality guidance within the group and individual context. There is however, a condition which one must take into consideration. The Guidance teacher must, in the first instance know how and when humour should be applied within the group context; secondly, he is responsible for ensuring that humour is not abused, either by the group or himself. Should these conditions be met, then humour should have a beneficial effect on the group.

Humour has been found to be a tool in group counselling rather than being a stamp (feature) of spontaneity. The critic may well reason that one Guidance teacher may possess the gift of humour which the next may not have and that such gift operated naturally. Such reasoning however, is unconvincing it is unlikely for a Guidance teacher to possess no sense of humour. Most Guidance teachers do possess a sense of humour to a greater or lesser degree.

Humour in group guidance should be spontaneously. It should primarily reflect the attitude of the Guidance teacher, it being, namely, that he accepts it as an obvious form of expression within he group which should be promoted and encouraged. In conclusion, it is hoped that this discussion may serve as a framework for further applied research on the role which humour should serve in educational-academic and vocational guidance.

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